

Frequently Asked Questions

What is the purpose of wilderness?

In the Wilderness Act of 1964, Congress recognized the need to preserve certain lands in their natural condition as a resource for present and future generations of the American people to enjoy. Though the law does not outline specific criteria, it describes wilderness as generally undisturbed federal land “retaining its primeval character and influence, without permanent improvements or human habitation” and requires that the land be managed to preserve this wilderness character. Wilderness designations, which can only be made by Congress, provide lasting protection for these lands. Public uses emphasized in the Wilderness Act include recreational, scenic, scientific, educational, conservation, and historical use.

Does a wilderness designation add to federal land ownership?

No. A wilderness designation can only be made on existing federal lands. Furthermore, the agency charged with managing the land does not change if an area becomes part of the Wilderness Preservation System. Each of the four major land management agencies, the National Forest Service, the National Park Service, the Bureau of Land Management, and U.S. Forest Service, manage wilderness areas within their jurisdictions.

What sorts of activities are allowed in a wilderness area?

- Hiking
- Camping
- Hunting and fishing
- Horseback riding
- Established grazing
- Maintenance of stock ponds, fences, and other existing support facilities
- Rock collecting for personal use
- Control of fire, insects, invasive species and disease

What sorts of activities / facilities are prohibited in a wilderness area?

- Commercial enterprise (aside from commercial recreation)
- Man-made structures
- Permanent or temporary roads
- Motorized vehicle use (except as necessary to meet requirements for the administration of the area, emergency situations, and occasional use by grazing permittees)
- Biking and other forms of mechanized transport (wheelchairs are allowed)

What about managing for fire, noxious weeds, and wildlife?

The Wilderness Act specifically allows such measures as may be necessary to control fire, insects, and disease. Furthermore, states retain their jurisdiction and responsibilities with respect to wildlife and fish. Although federal land managers must generally complete management activities within wilderness with the minimum tools necessary to accomplish a task, they retain the ability to manage fish and wildlife in wilderness areas in cooperation with state agencies.